

# CAR CUSTOMISING CUSTOM AND EXERCISED



**MODIFYING A PRESTIGE MODEL CAN SEEM A MINEFIELD. ANDY ENRIGHT LOOKS AT THE STATE OF THE MARKET**

**A quick question to set your grey matter to work. Is it a conceit to think that we can improve on the best that some of the world's most prestigious car companies can create? After all, they've ploughed millions of dollars of research and development into a given model, honed it through thousands of miles of testing and have employed the greatest designers, passed the results through customer clinics and focus groups and finally delivered it to your door on the back of a massive promotional budget. Yet the market for personalising cars continues to grow and not only at the Saxo and Civic end. Modifications for prestige sports models are enormously popular.**

Naturally, the stakes are a little higher than if you're just messing about with a £1,500 motor but if you follow some broadly laid out rules, there's no reason why aftermarket modifications shouldn't boost the appeal of your car. The market is extremely wide, ranging from personalised number plates for prestige saloons right across to full 'Fast and Furious' conversions for Japanese evo cars.

If you subscribe to the view that excess went out in the eighties, there are still a few modifications you can consider. A personalised plate gives a distinctive look, as long as you don't attempt anything a little too cute. First names are definitely a little showy but initials work well and are usually that bit more affordable. The rich pickings once available to plate speculators have now largely dried up and DVLA have fully cottoned on to the worth of their newly issued plates.

For prestige saloon cars, a private plate and possibly an alloy wheel upgrade will be the extent of most modifications. Mesh grille replacements have proved popular with Jaguar owners looking to replicate the sports appeal of the 'R' supercharged models. The nineties enthusiasm for dechroming and colour coding is now seen as a little passé.

With sports models you get a good deal more leeway but there are a few rules you should observe. The first is that British sports cars such as Lotuses, TVRs and Caterhams are rarely fair game for extensive customisation and nor are Italian models like Maseratis, Ferraris and Lamborghinis. German sports models such as BMWs, Porsches, Audis and Mercedes models can offer rich scope but definitely reward a subtle touch. The days of Strosek and Koenig wide body kits have long passed. DTM (German touring car race series) style modifications are still popular on the BMW 3 series, Mercedes C-class, Audi A4 and even the Opel/Vauxhall Calibra. It's important to mirror 'house styles'. For example, if you need to uprate the wheels on your E36 BMW M3 Evo, it's best to keep the same five-spoke basic design but modify the style slightly. Mercedes often prefer a monobloc design like a Lorinser wheel whereas cross-spoke BBS style wheels have largely fallen from favour. A number of interesting styling options exist for the Porsche Boxster including a reasonably priced set of body modifications designed to bring early models up to date with the current car. Even 911 drivers have some options open to them, including a beautiful GT3-style spoiler kit and wheels from Porsche. It's not cheap though.

If you really want to go to town on your car, then it's best to opt for a Japanese sports model. The 'Big Five' that generate the most interest are the Subaru Impreza, the Mitsubishi Lancer Evo, the Mazda RX-7, the Toyota Supra and the daddy of the bunch, the Nissan Skyline GT-R. The rule for wheels is that virtually anything goes as long as it's huge. Eighteen and nineteen inch rims are the norm but make sure you budget for tyres. With alloys, the bigger you go, the more expensive your rubber will work out at. Assuming you've got clearance under your arches, a set of eighteen-inch rims with mid-range low profile tyres tends to work out at around £1,000. Accessories such as locking wheel nuts and wheel lights, however, are reasonably priced. Three-spoke wheels were briefly in vogue during the nineties but have now fallen from fashion although you may still spot them on a few import cars. Chromed wheels are an American affectation that is starting to translate to this country.

Fashions come and go quickly in this corner of the market. Underbody neon lights, which were the height of fashion a couple of seasons ago, are now seen as a bit 2002. Likewise, fake aircraft-style aluminium fuel filler caps often look a bit OTT if the rest of the car is bog-standard. Twin light conversions remain popular, especially if backed up with a xenon lighting kit. A rally-style composite headlamp kit is a must if you bought one of the bug-eyed Mk II Subaru Imprezas and Suzuki Cappuccino fixed headlamp pods are a popular conversion amongst Mazda RX-7 drivers looking to ditch the dated pop-up lamp units. If you drive a Skyline, look for parts from Trust, Mines, Jun and Greddy. Exhausts are another area in which the Japanese feel that bigger is better. Many import cars are fitted with rear pipes that you'd need to check for tramps in the morning. You'll need to ensure the pipe is legal for UK noise and emissions, but a number of surprisingly affordable options exist if you need a fully custom made system.

The Japanese 'Gran Turismo' style is to go for lots of graphics with manufacturers names stacked up behind the front wheel. White Shelby stripes look good if you've got the power to carry them off but otherwise less is usually more. The same goes for window tinting. The all-black 'thugged out' look will soon become illegal and besides, after spending all that money on your car, you need people to see who's inside. A light UV protective tint will not only protect your peepers but will also protect your interior plastics from going brittle and fading.

Regardless of its country of origin, adding a reprogrammed engine control unit (or chip) is a popular modification, especially for turbocharged cars. You'll need to ensure that the engine's power doesn't overwhelm the brakes, clutch and suspension but otherwise it's a fairly affordable, subtle and effective move. Your insurance company will also need to know.

It's important to remember that aftermarket modifications may improve your enjoyment but they often limit the appeal of your car when the time comes to sell. The trick is limiting the appeal to a bunch of keen petrolheads rather than killing it stone dead. To refer back to our original question, yes you can improve the best a big manufacturer can produce but bear in mind that 'improvements' are often subjective.